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Rosa & Winton Eugene:
**A Marriage
of Making**

STORY BY
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Central to the relief style of Pottery by Eugene are themes of identity, family and generations as expressed both in portraits and symbolically.



Bending Over Backwards, 2001, coil-built, mock mosaic using grout and tobacco spit glaze, 20 1/2 x 11 x 20 in.

Opposite:
Winton and Rosa
Eugene sitting by the
wood-burning kiln,
which they fire once
a year.

"Art," according to Cicero "is born of the observation and investigation of nature." Such activities take place in Cowpens, SC, a small town just off I-85 and east of Spartanburg, best known as an important Revolutionary War battlefield. However, Cowpens is also the home of potters Winton and Rosa Eugene, a husband-and-wife team who together create Pottery by Eugene. The couple have observed many aspects of nature—human nature and our relationship to the environment—having grown up in Louisiana and South Carolina and lived in Chicago for more than 20 years. Their pottery reflects the rural South as well as urban issues. Their studio is characteristic of their work—strong and well built. Winton proudly proclaims that the structure, a Morton Building, will not rust and can withstand tornados. Upon closer inspection, one notices the M that occupies the pediment of the building and is the symbol found throughout the country on hundreds of barns and stables. Barns, country stores and cotton gins—mostly wooden frame buildings—are the subject of paintings that Winton did before and since becoming a potter.

In 1986, at the suggestion of Rosa and their daughter, Fredriana, Winton took up pottery as a hobby. The family traveled to Atlanta to purchase a kick wheel and other equipment from an architect whose increased workload kept him from making pots. Six months later, after reading as much as he could about the topic and working

at the wheel, Winton had a garage full of greenware. He entered Greenville's Freedom Aloft arts festival in 1987, sold \$300 worth of pottery and, soon after, quit his day job. He realized he enjoyed making pots and to improve he would have to devote more time to the craft. "If I was going to be doing something, it might as well be making pottery." The short, heavy pieces became taller and less chunky. Most of the forms were traditional, useful pieces—mugs, bowls, cream and sugar sets, teapots, pitchers and covered jars. Winton began painting barns and other rural scenes on their sides. He practically begged Rosa to do the glazes. She was meticulous in the measuring and mixing, producing a consistent glaze time after time. The importance of intense colors and controlled application where the glazes do not run are attributes that collectors come to expect from Pottery by Eugene.

Carved or raised relief images are another "signature" of the Eugenes' work. Winton began carving pieces to decrease their heaviness, and eventually portraits made their way onto the surface. Central to this style are themes of identity, family and generations as expressed both in portraits and symbolically. *Creation of a People* is one of the early concept pieces. Winton deftly incised a wood-grain surface into the white clay vessel. "The wood grain... it all goes back to the ship." The slave ships that brought over Africans of many different cultures to the Americas, where they

Winton's artistic philosophy of producing aesthetically pleasing pots could not be achieved without Rosa's precision in making beautiful, consistent glazes.



Far left:
Rosa glazing a vase and pitcher, both featuring hand-painted scenes by Winton.



Left:
A group of pitchers drying outside after being thrown on the wheel, carved by Winton and then sanded. They'll be fired next in the electric kiln before being glazed.

Opposite:
Masked, 2001, coil-built jug, matte glaze, low relief and etched stoneware, 17 x 10½ x 15½ in.





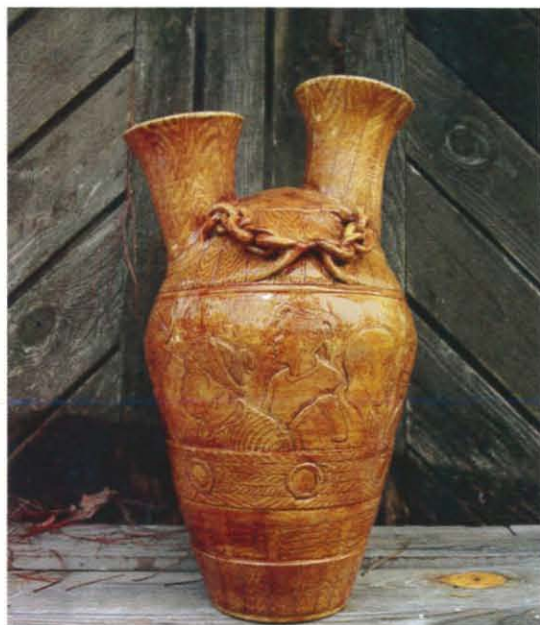
Top:
Coil-built pieces in the bisque stage, from left to right: *Hanging Out With my Friends*, 2007, *Bridged*, 2007, *The Price / Freedom*, 2008.

Bottom:
Wheel-thrown, wood-fired pieces, from left to right: *Endangered Species / Global Warming* teapot, *Turtled* covered jar, *Tobacco* pitcher, *Tunneled Vision* jug, *Tobacco spoon jar*.



Top:
Creation of a People,
 1995, wheel-thrown,
 low relief, sculpted
 chain and fluted top,
 etched wood-grain
 motif, electric fired,
 stained then glazed,
 20½ x 11 x 20 in.

Bottom:
*Endangered Species /
 Global Warming*, 2008,
 coil-built, low relief
 and etched stoneware,
 Ben's green glaze,
 10 x 19 x 8½ in.



became one people, hence the title. Chains link two spouts, the taller representing the male, the shorter the female. Portholes from the ships were carved into the piece. The form also combines the Native American ceramic wedding vessel with the European baluster vase. A brown Mason stain was applied to the carved surface and it was glazed again.

During our conversation about their pottery, Winton said, "If you notice, I'm more earthly. One guy came out here when I first started and told me my work was political. That's Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. I ain't doing that. I want people to have a pleasant experience. I don't want people to be all angry. Rosa was more political than I was. She was more abstract. I always wanted to do it so people could understand." Rosa interjected, "concrete" to which Winton agreed, "Yeah, concrete." He went on, "Rosa comes along and abstract came out—no faces on people, no identity—it's just a whole human concept of society and civilization having the same problem—no different than the problem between black and white, really."

Concept pieces develop out of the numerous ongoing conversations between Winton and Rosa about current events or ideas that Rosa wants to address or the theme for an upcoming exhibit. The two talk things over and decide what should visually happen in a piece. Since she began coiling in 1996, it is Rosa who, more often than not, creates the large sculptural forms. Regarding the piece *Bending Over Backwards*, Winton states, "You have to do it to get along and sometimes to keep your job." Rosa adds, "You have to bend over backwards to get along. This piece is really talking about the freedom of speech. When you bend over you can only bend so far. Then it suppresses your freedom of speech. Everybody should be able to say whatever he or she wants to say. I would tell people the point-blank truth. People don't want to hear the truth. I've had to work on being more diplomatic." Rosa pushed the limits of the grog-heavy clay in creating an off-centered form. Winton populated the organic form with faceless, symbolic people who are bending over backwards. Stretched and pulled, these people—like the clay itself—do not reach the breaking point. The lustrous coppery-bronze surface provides a sharp contrast to the off-white grout used to outline figures that are reminiscent of Keith Haring's energetic line drawings.

While the exterior of the Eugene's studio is barnlike, the interior accommodates the needs and preferences of the potters. The walls—an array of bright orange, buttery yellow and green—are adorned with artwork collected during the Eugene's travels—photographs and paintings from artists in San Francisco, paintings by Winton, as well as African masks and Caribbean metalwork. There are cabinets filled with glazes, plenty of counter space for setting work out, scales and jars, and a large sink for measuring and cleaning. A waist-high wall provides a place to display work while creating an area for Winton to turn and decorate. Winton now uses an electric wheel. Aided by the efficiency of an extruder, which lines the far wall, Rosa creates coiled vessels of various heights and shapes. The back wall of the studio is painted with an underwater scene—colorful fish and water spirits inhabit the kelp. These spirits look like masks from the Ivory Coast. Similar images made their way onto *Endangered Species / Global Warming*, with its relief images of the water spirits, turtles, other animals and trees.

Behind the orange wall is the kiln room, where three electric

kilns are housed, used primarily for bisque firing. Shelves hold works in progress, and the room has a large rolling door to access the outside. Further out from the studio is the large gas kiln, approximately eight by eight feet. A welder in Spartanburg made the stainless steel box and door. Winton then insulated the box and built out the rest of the kiln. Nearby is the wood-fired kiln that Winton and Rosa built, with a firebox that is about the same size as the kiln space. High temperatures necessary for stoneware are reached faster, and the firing time decreased to around six hours.

Once a year, the Eugenes fire the wood-burning kiln, a method favored among the many folk potters who work in South Carolina, Georgia and North Carolina. Copper, bronze, cobalt and celadon are the glazes used on their wood-fired pieces. The results are very different from the bisque- and gas-fired works and appeal to a different type of collector. According to ceramics historian and collector Arthur Goldberg, the combination of the low-relief decoration with the bronze glaze recalls the work of the 19th-century American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, whose early training was as a cameo artist.

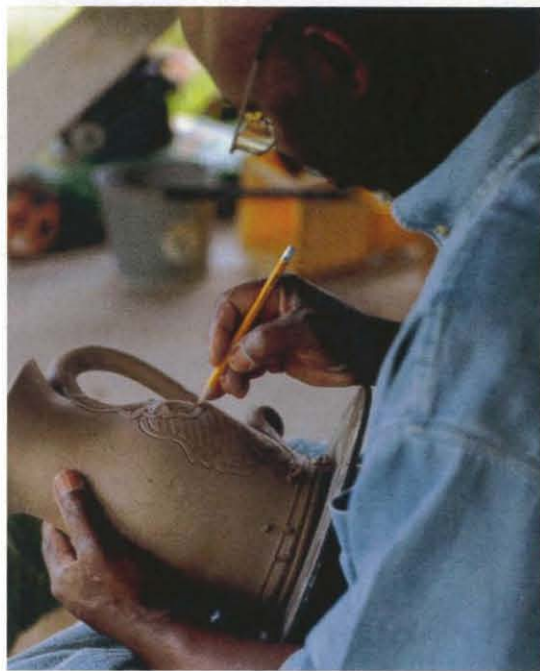
Lynn Robertson, director of the McKissick Museum, in Columbia, SC, notes that the Eugenes' style is unique and distinguishable from the work of other Southern potters. That is not to say that the

couple function in an artistic vacuum. References to other potters and artistic movements can be glimpsed in their pieces but have not been copied. They demonstrate at numerous arts and craft shows each year, including the Catawba Valley Pottery Festival in Hickory, NC. They exhibit with other African American artists in group shows, such as "Diversity in Unity: Contemporary African American Ceramics," at Baltimore Clayworks in 2004.

Each year Rosa creates a new signature glaze and Winton continues to experiment with different subjects. This year's Chanjari blue glaze, with its deep, almost indigo hue, is striking against the white Laguna clay; the portraits in profile are no longer strictly African-American. The Eugenes have many works in progress like *The Price/Freedom* and new ideas not yet worked out in clay. They take risks and experiment to see what works and what does not, educating and encouraging others while demonstrating and discussing their work. What global or local topics will they address in the coming years? Regardless of what Rosa and Winton create, the works shaped by their travels, interaction with people and the natural world around them, and, ultimately, the result of their artistic and philosophical vision are true collaborations. ♦

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The Eugenes take risks and experiment to see what works and what does not, educating and encouraging others while demonstrating and discussing their work.



Far left:
Winton carving the
Abstraction motif into a
recently thrown pitcher.

Left:
A Majority in Relief
teapot, 2010, wheel-
thrown, low relief and
etched, Chanjari blue
glaze, 9 x 9½ x 6¾ in.



Opposite:
Abstraction pitcher, 2010,
wheel-thrown, carved
white stoneware with
Chanjari blue glaze,
9 x 6½ x 8½ in.
Abstraction vase, 2010,
carved white stoneware
with evergreen glaze,
6½ x 3½ x 6 in.

